

Breast Cancer in Men: What You Need to Know

People often think of breast cancer as a disease that exclusively targets women. While it is true that a great majority of breast cancer cases are women, Doctor Jessica Guingrich, a medical radiologist for OSF HealthCare and the Susan G. Komen Breast Center, says the disease doesn't discriminate against men.

"Men and women both have breasts, so men and women can both get breast cancer. It's just significantly less common in a man because of the way their breasts develop, compared to the way a woman's breast develops," said Dr. Guingrich.

Breast cancer in men is rare; about 1% of all breast cancers are diagnosed in males. According to the American Cancer Society, in 2017 about 2,470 invasive breast cancers will be diagnosed in men, and 460 men will die from the disease.

65 year old Allen Smith of Canton is part of that 1%. Smith, a prostate cancer survivor, was going through testing when a CT scan found an area of density in his chest wall. Doctors recommended a mammogram, which was a strange request to Smith.

"I thought, everybody's going to look at me. There's a guy coming in here, you know he's going to have a mammogram or whatever, and I felt a little odd," he said. "I wasn't embarrassed by it, but I just felt a little odd because, you know this is kind of just like a new thing. I mean, you just don't hear of this."

Soon after his scan at the Susan G. Komen Breast Center in Peoria, Smith was diagnosed with stage zero breast cancer.

"You could have knocked me on the floor with a feather," said Smith. "I had no idea. I had no lump, I had no problem whatsoever there that I knew of."

Because of the rarity of breast cancer in men, many don't know the signs of a potential problem. Dr. Guingrich says a lump in the breast area, usually behind the nipple, is the main symptom for men to look for.

"It's important to get that lump checked out because in a man, that lump, if it is a cancer, just has a greater chance of getting into the chest wall and into the muscle, into the nipple, into the lymph nodes much quicker than in a female because there just isn't much tissue buffer around a mass that's developing," she warned.

Men can also experience skin dimpling or puckering around the breast area, nipple retraction, redness or scaling of the nipple or breast skin, or even discharge from the nipple. Dr. Guingrich also says, as in women, family history of breast cancer needs to be considered for men. Both Smith's mother and grandmother had breast cancer.

"If a man has a really strong family history, or if a man maybe has a family member who is a BRCA gene carrier, it's really important to be aware of that risk," said Dr. Guingrich. "You need to talk to your doctor about what can be done. A man should consider having genetic testing perhaps if they have a very strong family history of breast cancer."

According to the American Cancer Society, the best strategies for reducing the number of deaths caused by the disease is early detection and prompt treatment. Smith says, there is no reason to delay if you think you have a problem.

“If you think there’s something wrong with you, follow up. Don’t think you’re going to bother the doctors, don’t think you’re going to be a pain, follow up. Get it checked,” Smith urged.

Dr. Guingrich agrees. “I think the important thing is that if a man notices a change to just be reassured that the physicians at breast facilities are there to help and to solve problems and give reassurance that things are okay, and if something needs to be biopsied, then we biopsy it and try to make it as comfortable of an environment as possible,” she said.

Knowing your risk of breast cancer is the first step toward early intervention for both men and women. OSF HealthCare has many breast health resources available. Go to osfhealthcare.org/breast or click [here](#) for a free online breast cancer risk assessment.